

1. A VISION FOR SHEFFIELD

Sheffield's Master Plan identifies past trends, inventories current conditions, and describes a unified vision for the future of our Town. This document represents two years of work by a broad cross-section of the community. The plan serves as a guide to assist the Town in ensuring balanced growth and change over the next 10 years; guiding the protection of its small-town and rural character and unique natural resources while maintaining or improving the overall quality of life for all residents. Unplanned development and sprawl would rob the town of the endearing and livable qualities that make it a place people want to live. Coordinated, sustainable growth will enhance these qualities to secure a vital future for Sheffield.

1. The Vision

Nestled between the Taconic Range on the New York state border and the hills of the Berkshire Plateau, Sheffield, Massachusetts with its long history as a New England farming community, is a diverse, small, rural town of about 3,000 full-time residents clustered primarily in two village centers dating to the Colonial era. Sheffield's deep agricultural and historic roots remain evident in outlying farms and residences; some of them built more than 200 years ago. Lying in a broad floodplain of the Housatonic River, Sheffield is blessed with abundant and unique natural resources, from forest to field to fen. Its landscape is integral to the town's quality of life and much of its economy, including farming, service-oriented small businesses, retailing and tourism.

Sheffield's natural beauty, rural setting, historic character and proximity to major cities make it an extremely desirable place to live for both full and part-time residents. Nationally, Sheffield is known as a Mecca for antiques-hunters and for its rural landscape. Unlike many towns in the Berkshires, steady growth during much of the 20th century helped make Sheffield one of the fastest growing communities in the County, particularly between 1990 and 2000. While there is a trend of small communities becoming suburbs to larger nearby towns, such as Great Barrington, Sheffield does not want to become a bedroom community.

The loss of valuable agricultural lands and open spaces combined with increasing traffic and building development with the resultant demand for local government services prompted the Town to create a plan to guide future growth and protect vital natural and cultural resources. With a rich cultural tradition and a friendly small-town atmosphere, Sheffield wishes to grow through a pro-active approach that balances the unique qualities that embody the Town's identity with its economic, housing, transportation, recreational and educational needs. Sheffield is committed to working in partnership with local residents, community groups and other parties to fulfill this vision for the future.

The Town of Sheffield envisions itself in 2014 as a community where...

- The rural beauty and character are maintained and enhanced and the town's agricultural heritage is promoted and kept vital.

- Unique and special natural resources, including lakes, streams, ponds, wetlands, wildlife habitats and corridors, open spaces, hillsides, ridgelines and scenic vistas are protected through wise stewardship, which encourages the creation of compatible recreational and economic opportunities such as ecotourism.
- Historic and cultural buildings and landscapes are preserved and enhanced in a setting where housing and business development are attractively sited following a traditional New England pattern of villages and farmhouse clusters. Sheffield Center and Ashley Falls Village serve a mix of uses including acting as the primary community gathering places, within residential neighborhoods, in turn surrounded by rural landscapes.
- Housing is available in a wide range of types and different price ranges to ensure that Sheffield can meet the diverse needs and lifestyles of local residents.
- Existing compatible businesses, economic opportunities and entrepreneurial development are available, supported and encouraged.
- Current technologies are available to businesses and residents and energy efficient practices are promoted and embraced.
- Essential municipal facilities and services, such as schools and a broad transportation network, are provided at the highest quality affordable to all members of the local community.

2. How the plan was developed

A master plan is a document that serves multiple community needs. According to State laws that address the requirements and guidelines for preparing such a plan, a master plan's primary purpose is to serve Town boards and organizations, including the Selectmen and the Planning Board, which officially adopts the Plan, as a framework to guide development within the town. To fulfill this role as a planning tool, a master plan should be based on a wide range of social, economic, environmental and land use information.

A master plan, however, is not a static listing of facts and figures. It should reflect the changing needs and circumstances of the community, and be periodically updated. It should reflect the wishes, desires and aspirations of the community and its members about growth and development. Specific strategies that address growth issues and their impact on the town are integrated into a long-term land use plan that can guide development and changes over the next 10 years and help the community become what it wants to be.

A master plan also serves as the guide for land-use regulations. It can bolster applications for local and state grants for various community projects, and guide private decision-making on new development and business growth. The Master Plan also identifies issues that require further investigation, planning or design, and provides a framework of specific actions needed to accomplish community goals and projects.

A master plan can also help people learn more about their community, both as a resource document and through the process of public involvement in its creation.

The Board of Selectmen voted to accept two state grants for the creation of a town-wide master plan. A Master Plan Steering Committee was assembled by the Board of Selectmen and the plan-creation process begun in the spring of 2002. A request-for-proposal was developed, and the planning and consulting firm of Dufresne-Henry of Boston was hired to facilitate the plan's creation.

Maps

An extensive set of maps was developed using a geographic information system (GIS or electronic mapping) as an important tool and element of the master plan project. This series of maps illustrate Sheffield's natural resources and environmental constraints, existing land uses and property boundaries, historic and cultural amenities, housing and population distribution, business locations, and the local road network and other utilities. It is an important visual and quantitative tool for planning the community's future and for gathering information from and sharing that information with the community.

Even with professional and technical support, much of the work on the plan was done by volunteers from the community. The plan represents the work of many residents, both those who live here year-round and those who live here part-time, business owners, community groups, conservation organizations, and public officials.

3. Community Involvement

The Master Plan Steering Committee was assembled by the Board of Selectmen to provide a broad cross section of local residents and opinions. The Committee included representatives from the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, town officials and department heads, and local residents.

Under the guidance of the Steering Committee, a comprehensive public participation program was developed and implemented. This program contained three broad elements: a town-wide survey of resident opinions concerning key issues in Sheffield; public workshops; and subcommittees to focus on key elements of community development in Sheffield.

Community Survey.

The survey results served as a foundation for the work of the steering committee and subcommittees in shaping goals, strategies and actions for managing growth in Sheffield.

In the fall of 2002, a community-wide survey was sent to all households in Sheffield. Questions solicited opinions regarding town services, the local economy, growth and development, natural resources, recreation, housing, traffic and transportation, and other present and future concerns. (The survey questionnaire and the survey results report are included in Appendix 2).

A total of 1,845 surveys were successfully mailed, with participation encouraged through announcements and articles in area newspapers, public bulletins posted around town, and public meetings and workshops. A total of 293 surveys were returned, for a 16% response rate – an excellent response from the community.

Surveys were sorted by region and residency. The distribution and return rates were as follows:

Sheffield Community Survey Results by Group					
Group	Total Distribution	No. of Responses	Response Rate within subgroup (%)	Percent of Total Responses	Total Responses (rounded to nearest 10)
Sheffield Center Residents	228	36	16%	12%	Primary home owners 80%-
Ashley Falls Residents	151	16	11	8%	
Rural-Area Residents	1,276	177	14%	60%	
Second-Home Owners	190	58	31%	10%	20%
Other	NA	6	NA		
Total	1,845	293	16%		

Business Survey.

A questionnaire on the state of business in Sheffield was mailed to over 250 members of the business community using a combination of the Master Plan business list and the town list of personal property. The committee received over 63 responses, (25%) including some of Sheffield's largest employers. We tabulated and analyzed:

- Responses in total and
- "Large employers" as a special subset because certain needs could be seen more clearly.

Not all respondents were employers. Some came from attendees of the Business Forum, which was held in Dewey Hall in the spring of 2003, and others were sole proprietorships.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to give the Economic Development subcommittee input from the business community in order to formulate meaningful recommendations. All work was done and paid for by volunteers.

Public Workshops.

The Steering Committee and subcommittees coordinated a series of workshops for Sheffield residents to identify and discuss issues facing the community, and to identify desired future actions:

- Community Visioning Workshop 1 (November 23, 2002)
- Community Visioning Workshop 2 (January 28, 2003)
- Master Plan Joint Subcommittee Workshop (February 10, 2003)
- Sheffield Student Workshop (January 8, 2003)
- Sheffield Business & Economic Development Forum (April 7, 2003)
- Sheffield Farmers Forum (July 21, 2003)
- Public Official and Civic Organization Working Sessions (June 3 & 10, 2004)
- Culminating Public Forum (June 18, 2004)

The visioning workshops facilitated a public discussion of Sheffield's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats (SWOT). Participants were asked, "what do you think might happen in Sheffield", not just "what would you like to see happen." Such workshops help educate the community about the existing conditions and forces that shape the community, and they identify points on which residents agree or disagree, helping to build a common framework through listening and dialogue.

An estimated 100 residents participated in the initial visioning workshops, and as a result some 50 people signed up to work on various subcommittees. A workshop for the subcommittee participants helped them identify town conditions and trends and review community survey results and preliminary goals.

To gain insights from key citizen groups, the Steering Committee facilitated workshops with local high school students, business owners, and farmers. A full report on all public workshops and forums is included in Appendix 3.

Other participation efforts included:

- Special presentations to the Board of Selectmen and Planning Board and to various other local and regional organizations.
- An open house and exhibit at the Sheffield Fair in September 2003 showing maps and interim reports and providing residents the opportunity to ask questions of subcommittee members about the information, and share their own thoughts and vision for the Town.
- The Sheffield Master Plan Website was developed and housed on the Dufresne-Henry website to keep people informed on the progress of the plan, upcoming meetings, and on ways to get involved.
- Master Plan Resource Desks were created at Town Hall and Bushnell Sage Memorial Library including sections of the master plan, maps, sample plans and documents from other communities, and other publications of interest.

Master Plan Subcommittees.

The Steering Committee established four subcommittees to ensure that the plan was grounded in the community, as follows:

- Housing
- Transportation and Public Facilities & Services
- Economic Development
- Open Space/Recreation/Land Use

Each of these subcommittees held numerous meetings over a nine-month period from April to December, 2003 to review and draft sections of the master plan, conduct additional research, hold public forums, interview key stakeholders and solution providers, and formulate goals, actions and strategies. An additional survey of 275 businesses was conducted by the Economic Development Subcommittee, and the Farmers Forum was sponsored jointly by the Economic Development and Open Spaces, Recreation and Land Use Subcommittees.

4. Organization of the Plan

The plan is divided into three general sections:

- A Vision for Sheffield
- Current Trends and Conditions for key aspects of Town life, each with a set of recommendations for action
- The Community Action Plan & Recommended Next Steps to Maintain Momentum

A Vision for Sheffield. This summarizes how townspeople see our community now, and what we would like Sheffield to be in the future. The *Town Master Plan*'s inventory, analyses, and action recommendations are all geared to work from the present toward the community's desired future.

Current Trends and Conditions. This section's reports assess and document current demographics and housing; economic conditions; natural, agricultural, open space, recreational and historic and cultural resources, transportation issues; and public services and facilities in Sheffield. The land use section is a traditional master-plan element synthesizing that data to present future land-use scenarios, potential development impacts, and growth management ideas.

Each of these reports contains the most up-to-date data available, along with recent independent studies and reports. Each ends with a plan of goals, strategies, and action steps. Those interested in more in-depth information can refer to additional reports in the Appendices to the Plan.

The Community Action Plan & Next Steps to Maintain Momentum. This section ties together the ideas and recommendations developed in the previous reports. It lays out specific goals, strategies and actions for enhancing and managing future growth in housing, economic opportunities, resource protection, historic preservation, transportation improvements, and improvement of municipal facilities and services. The Action Plan ends with a set of recommendations regarding how to move from this planning effort into an on-going, proactive action effort.